

STATE OF CONNECTICUT
OFFICE OF THE CHILD ADVOCATE
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**Testimony by Jamey Bell, Acting Child Advocate
Regarding the Governor's Proposed Budget for
DMHAS and DDS**

Appropriations Committee
February 15, 2013

Senator Harp, Representative Walker, Senator Hartley, Representative Flexer, Representative Miller, Representative O'Brien, Senator Kane, Representative Miner, and members of the Appropriations Committee.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this written testimony regarding the Governor's proposed budget for executive branch health and hospital agencies. As the Acting Child Advocate, and former Executive Director of CT Voices for Children, I deeply appreciate the tremendous task before you regarding decisions that must be made about the state budget. The OCA offers the following to assist you in your deliberations.

The mandate of the Office of the Child Advocate (OCA) includes evaluating the delivery of state funded services to children and advocating for policies and practices that promote their well being and protect their special rights. Over 50% of the work we do—including responding to individual calls for assistance or information, and individual and systemic advocacy-- seeks to improve access to quality mental health services for children, youth and young adults. Many of the children, adolescents and young adults we are contacted about, or with whom we work directly, have spent significant time placed in hospitals or residential treatment facilities or are currently in a residential setting, committed to psychiatric hospitals, or incarcerated within the juvenile justice or adult corrections systems.

Connecticut has invested extensively during the past several years in developing capacity within the children's and young adults' mental health systems. Many improvements have been made in the development of effective in-home and community based services for some of our most vulnerable children, youth and young adults. Our work on behalf of children across state agencies, including DCF, DMHAS, DDS, DPH, and SDE, affirms that Connecticut's care of children has improved within all of these systems but the current infrastructure is fragile and uneven. It is still reported regularly that:

- thousands of CT children and youth with significant mental health needs have no access to care due to lack of appropriate health insurance;

- that needed services are not readily available in parts of our state, too often causing exacerbation of the child's needs or that there is a referral to inappropriate, but available, services;
- that school systems are overwhelmed with students who are presenting with complex behavioral/emotional issues resulting in ineffective and dangerous interventions within the school, or suspension and expulsion of students; and
- that our hospital emergency departments continue to experience extremely high and often disproportionate numbers of patients with complex mental health needs who spend days in the ED because of lack of appropriate resources in the community or other treatment facilities. This has the unfortunate consequence of diverting critically needed medical resources to other patients with potentially life-threatening conditions.

In addition, there is still significant evidence that families in need of services or supports across state agencies still face incredible challenges navigating the disparate systems.

It is imperative that we continue to support the progress already made, and ensure that identified gaps in services are filled, that children and young people and their families have timely access to needed services, and that we provide those services in the least restrictive, most natural environments possible. State agencies must be held accountable to demonstrate their ability to work together to minimize ineffective and costly overlaps, streamline access to needed services and ensure that their resources and expertise are shared.

Specific to the budget issues before you today, **OCA fully supports Governor Malloy's recommendation for increased funding to the DMHAS Young Adult Services (YAS) programs.** OCA has extensive experience working with YAS leadership and local programs over the past several years on behalf of numerous youth transitioning from the child welfare/children's mental health system. The needs of this population are quite extraordinary and DMHAS is working hard to develop a distinct service delivery approach that is developmentally and clinically appropriate, focused on recovery and skill building. Services at present are stretched to capacity and not equally available throughout the state. Failing to invest in services for these young people will undoubtedly result in increased high cost institutional stays, tragically including incarceration.

OCA also fully supports the proposed transfer of the Birth to Three program from DDS into the Governor's newly proposed Office of Early Childhood. The proposed consolidation and reorganization of many of the state's critical early childhood programs into one office could serve to streamline access and promote more effective coordination and collaboration between traditionally siloed services.

OCA urges you to continue to fully fund and support the planned expansion of School Based Health Centers. School based health centers have demonstrated both efficiency and effectiveness in delivering quality primary health care services, including critical mental health services, to thousands of children in Connecticut who would otherwise not have access due to lack of transportation, high costs of health care, and lack of knowledge about available services. School based health centers assist children, youth and families by providing a wide variety of health promotion services, as well as utilizing a multidisciplinary approach to management of

chronic illnesses which can negatively impact student attendance and learning. School based health centers are a very important component of ensuring access to health care for all children, as well as ensuring availability and readiness to learn.

The health and well being of Connecticut should be measured by the health and well being of Connecticut's children. It is imperative that funding decisions be evaluated through the lens of potential benefit or harm to children.

The Office of the Child Advocate stands ready to assist you in any way possible as you move through this challenging process. Thank you for the opportunity to share our input and recommendations and I look forward to working with you.